

**UKIT AT HULMA:
A BRIEF HISTORY OF PHILIPPINE SCULPTURE**

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**I. INTRODUCTION:
HISTORICAL LITERATURE AND APPROACHES**

The historiography on Philippine Sculpture, like most literature on Philippine Art, has only emerged over the past fifty years as a result of the increasing specialization of writers from the generation of often-prejudicial Western “tourist-correspondents” during the late 19th Century; to Filipino journalist-amateur art critics of the first half of the 20th Century; and finally to professional Filipino art critics and art historians schooled in academia during the second half. The writings of collector and critic Aurelio Alevero in the 1940s and early 1950s could form the basis of this third generation’s rise, to be quickly followed by others such as Rosalinda Orosa, Alejandro Roces, and especially Fernando Zobel in the latter 1950s. Zobel’s essays on Philippine Colonial Sculpture and Architecture in the 1957 publication *Art in the Philippines* is a pivotal document in establishing the field of sculpture in Philippine Art History. This would be followed by the essays and books of art critics Emmanuel Torres, Rodolfo Paras-Perez, Leonidas Benesa, Alicia Coseteng, Santiago Pilar, Regalado Trota Jose, and artist Dominador Castañeda from the 1960s to the 1990s. The abovementioned writers often utilized formalist and positivistic approaches in art history, utilizing a descriptive and “impressionistic” method of analyzing artistic content, with the exception of Zobel and Paras-Perez, whose common training at Harvard University predisposed them either to a more aestheticist and belletristic treatment of sculptural critique, or to a highly nuanced ideological engagement with the narrative of modernism.

The debates on national identity of Philippine Art started in the 1950s as a contradistinctive impetus justifying the project of modernism also transformed Philippine art historical discourse by the 1970s to emphasize a more reductively nationalistic and nativist valorization of subject matter, artistic form, and meaning-making. Alice Guillermo’s dominance of the art historical and critical literature on Philippine Sculpture from the 1980s to the early 2000s exemplifies this trend towards the Filipinization of aesthetic perspective, as well as the revaluation of “folk” and “native” art as on an equal plane with colonial and (Western-originating) modern high art. She was joined in this endeavor over the past twenty years by others like Felipe de Leon, Jr., Cid Reyes, Jeannie Javelosa, and younger critics like Roberto Paulino, Patrick Flores, Gerard Rey Lico, and this author, although it must also be added that the latter writers also emphasizes a more poststructuralist, postmodern, and postcolonial perspective rather than the more rigidified form of political economic critique, or the retreat towards an essentialist nativist valorization, engaged by the generation of Guillermo.

This essay attempts to provide an overview of Philippine Sculpture through a combination of empirical description, as well as the contextualization of these forms and practices according to specific historical, political-aesthetic, and socio-economic conditions of artistic production and distribution. The essay condenses the historical literature on Philippine Sculpture into three general categories: sculpture-making during the period of pre-Western contact, as well as those of the “unconquered” tribes of the various highlands, such as the Luzon Cordillera Central and western and southern Mindanao, which provides a contextual contrast between indigenous aesthetic traditions, and mediated “folk/native” forms and conditions of production engendered by the colonial economy. The second narrates the period of Western colonization starting from the missionary-driven Spanish *reconquista* from the late-16th Century, to the institution of the modern secular state by American colonizers in the first half of the 20th Century. This section also explores the various nuances of “folk,” “native,” “craft,” and “fine art” practices resulting from the epistemic reconfiguration of Filipino aesthetics to suit Western metropolitan—specifically ethnographic—priorities between urban cosmopolitan phantasmagoria and accretionism; versus rural minoritization and exoticization. These performative impulses of class/spatial bracketing

remain in legitimating circulation today among state cultural administrators and consecrated National Artists in their utterances on “national culture and the arts.”

The third section deals with the advent of modernity, nationalism, and the contemporary period of Philippine sculpture from the 1930s to the present. This section will trace the development of the field from a “monologic” discourse adhered upon by high Modernism, and its insistence of modernism’s validation of the Hegelian fulfillment of the historical climax; to the hybridized counter-production of native and contra avant-garde movements that deny the dissolution of subject matter (a point that most Modernists themselves seem to engage in ironically) and reiterate the integration of meaning, content, and the specificity of the local as contradistinction to the task of making sculpture meaningful to social and cultural contexts of the Philippines. These can be found through an engagement with identity issues associated with the rise of Postmodernism and Postcolonialism, such as gender and the native; continuing debates between the viability of public art vis-à-vis private sculptural commissions; or with the pragmatics of material production in a country which has yet to operate and sustain crucial industrial infrastructures for sculpture, such as bronze forges, marble/granite workshops, and art-quality hot glass. The limitations of patronage to a small elite circle based mostly in the financial district of Makati City in Manila, and the inability of the state to sustain the enterprise of public sculpture as a long-term project, opting instead for temporary propagandistic effects through resin-cast statuary, also helps explain this hybridity, as well as the overwhelming demands imposed by a small sculptural market that continues to hobble the expansion of the sculptural practice in the Philippines.

II. THE PRE-COLONIAL/UN-COLONIAL

Emblematic of the rich and diverse sculptural tradition based on native—and globally human cultural—concerns interrupted by Western expansionism and othering, the mortuary “grave goods” found in Palawan, Mindanao, and Luzon islands, among others, from the 9th Century BC to the 14th Century AD provide a glimpse into a world view and economy often rendered as lost, pristine, and Eden-like by its native “purity” and “essence” by nativist scholars belonging to the *Pantayong Pananaw* and *Pilipinolohiya* movement of the late-20th Century. The Manunggul Secondary Burial Jar, found in the Tabon Cave Complex at Quezon, Palawan, and dating to the late Iron Age, is the chief icon of this “pure” visage.¹ The jar’s body is painted in rich hematite reds, and scored and paddled with an elaborate design of waves; while the jar cover is hand-formed into the shape of a “boat-of-the dead” motif that apparently carries the spirit of the deceased contained within the jar, as navigated by a spiritual oarsman behind him. Although containing motifs and forms common throughout Southeast Asian sites of the same period (890-710 BC), this jar has often been essentialized by recent scholars as the purest form of Filipino native identity, an identity whose hybrid and external sources would problematize this depiction. Declared a national treasure and featured in the Philippine 1,000 peso bill, this jar, now at the National Museum of the Philippines in Manila, is also at the heart of intellectual debates about identity-formation and cultural validation in the postcolonial Philippine condition, in a sense replicating the Mexican museological experience with depicting the valorized native history of the pre-Hispanic Aztecs, Toltecs and Mayans that Nestor Garcia Canclini had also critiqued as a symptom of Latin American modernity.

This search for the nation from a pre-national state extends into the very rich archaeological sites of Mindanao, which includes the limestone secondary burial jars fitted with anthropomorphic head covers found at Pinol, Maitum, Saranggani Province dating between 5 BC-355 AD; and particularly the Butuan Boat burial sites (both found at the National Museum), as well as the golden hoard found in Agusan (now on long-term exhibition at the Ayala Museum)² dating from the 10th-13th Centuries. Symptoms of the elaborate network of maritime trade and “peoplings” between the hardwood forests, pearl-laden seas, and fabled “golden rivers” of Mindanao; and empires in Southern India, Indonesia, Indochina, and China, these relics also

¹“National Museum of the Philippines, Archeology Division” (<http://members.tripod.com/philmuseum/archaeo.htm>)

²“The Ayala Museum, Gold of Ancestors: Pre-Colonial Treasures of the Philippines” (http://www.ayalamuseum.org/index.php?option=com_ayala_content&task=viewexhibitpage&id=14)

catalogue the complex interweaving of cultural habits, acquired beliefs, and continuing practices of now-forgotten communities along the bays and riversides of the archipelago.

The mortuary practice of grave goods provision that extends from the Manunggul Jar to the Agusan Hoard bespeaks of a peculiar character found not only among Filipinos, but also among other major cultures great and small throughout the world. Other than the mortuary tradition, one also finds the sculpture of religious and spiritual deities in Luzon, which often took the form of paired male-female nudes that recall collective narratives of tribal genesis—and in the case of the Ifugao, used pragmatically to guard the ricefields and literally “stomp on” invading rats. These paired statues are incidentally found as grave markers among the Mahafaly-Malagasy in Madagascar, who are the westernmost of the Austronesian peoples, of which the Filipinos count as among the oldest branches. Called *bulol* by the Ifugaos, and *likha* by pre-Colonial Tagalogs, these anthropomorphic gendered sculptures are what remains of a large sculptural tradition destroyed by Catholic missionary zeal, of which fragments only remain to narrate their tantalizing aesthetic strength, and cultural-political relevance as images around which a vast architecture of social conditioning, economic class exchange, administration, healing and warfare, political decision-making, and political-aesthetic renewal converged.

A similar, though less emphasized, tradition of marking sculptured gravemarkers according to gender exists in the Sulu archipelago among the Samal-Badjao who erect woodcarved posts with either a phallic or floral finial on the graves of their ancestors. However, Mindanao sculptural aesthetics is distinguished from the more austere, geometrically planar forms of Luzon sculpture by its more ornate curvilinear traditions centered on the Indian *naga* (serpent), and Southeast Asian *pako rabong* (vine) and *sarimanok* (mythical plumed bird) motifs that one can find especially in the architectural details of the Lanao del Norte-based Muslim Maranao wooden grand house known as *torogan*, or their musical instruments and body ornaments. Brass casting is also a highly refined sculptural practice in Mindanao, from the geometric patterns of the ornate brass containers of the Maranao, to the elaborate body ornaments of the T’boli of southern Cotabato. Collectively referred to as *okir*, Mindanao traditional sculpture is an amalgamation of South and Southeast Asian cultural forms, and local transformations and appropriations of these forms to privilege particular social and political tropes revolving around the clan, faith, and the search for material fulfillment.

III. FROM RECONQUISTA TO SECULARISM: FOLK AND THE CITY

With Spanish colonization starting in 1565, and ending with the entry of America in 1898, sculptural production in lowland colonized areas was radically re-formed to suit the new conventions of Catholic iconography, utilizing mostly Chinese labor and the attendant permutations caused by the amalgamation between Chinese-Filipino-Spanish blood and cultural infusions throughout the three centuries of rule from the viceroyalty of Nueva España and, after 1821, direct rule from Madrid. The system of colonial economy centering on the Galleon trade of prestige goods between China, the Philippines, Nueva España and Spain would also characterize sculptural production from the early 17th to late-18th Centuries with a distinct aesthetic flavor, as when the carving of *santos*, *retablos*, *relieves*, and *yglesia* architectural details would reflect a hybrid infusion of Mexican, Chinese, Malay, and Hispanic forms. The dressing up of *santos* for the regular round of processions on top of elaborately decorated *carrozas* would also cue us to the adaptation of indigenous concepts of “sacred incarnation” through the tedious processes of painting and garbing up these religious statues using a profusion of floral and curvilinear forms, rich colors, and precious fabrics, metals and stones as an act of devotion and social capitalization, in ways not dissimilar to the older practices of “feeding” *likha* with real food, and gilding their bodies in gold.

As most of the early sculptors neither signed their works, nor where they documented by the friars under whom they worked, the earliest names that come to us begin from the second period of Spanish colonization, when the cutting of the Mexican umbilical cord forced the government to open Manila to international trade in 1814, resulting in the boom of export agriculture, and the rise of the *mestizo* merchant class. Clustered mostly in the mixed raced Manila district of Santa Cruz, the first *gremios* or workshops operating under the medieval guild system that catered to sacred sculpture for both Church and secular patrons were established, which also

assisted in the development of the teaching of sculpture at the nearby *Academia de Dibujo y Pintura* (founded in 1821).

These sculptors also engaged in the “export market” for the increasing Orientalist novelty of depicting “people types” (*tipos de país*) as part of the narrative of racial stereotyping and objectification that justified the colonial enterprise to its metropolitan public. Involved in both endeavors of Catholic sculptural production and secular Orientalia that spanned the 19th Century were Bonifacio Arevalo, Marcelino Nepomuceno, and Graciano Nepomuceno. Other than Santa Cruz, the town of Paete in Laguna was also a major center for sculpture, and a tradition of sculptural families which continues to the present, not only through such subjects as *santos*, but more importantly in their production of popular sculpture throughout the various town fairs of central and southern Luzon in the form of the brightly-colored papier maché toy horses and water buffalos known as *taka*—a seeming acknowledgment of the Mexican infusion of the *piñata*. Genre was also an increasing concern during the latter part of the 19th Century, as taste preferences changed to include the everyday and the classical as subject matter that could now be engaged on—although the last was still hobbled by friar opposition to the nude. It is indicative of the comparative economy of distinction between Spanish and Filipino artistic status, however, that the four most prominent secular bronze statues raised by Spain in Manila in the 19th Century—*Carlos IV*, *Isabela II*, *Legaspi & Urdaneta*, and *Padre Miguel de Benavidez*, were all academic imports from the Peninsula.

The arrival of the Americans hastened the secular trend of Philippine sculpture by opening the floodgates of education—as well as the opportunities of mass emancipation—via the University of the Philippines School of Fine Arts (now the College of Fine Arts), of which the more prominent early graduates were Moises Villaluz and Guillermo Estrella Tolentino. Tolentino’s rise as the most prominent Filipino exponent of the Beaux Arts academic tradition of sculpture from the West was initiated by his collegiate grounding at UP, and furthered by studies in New York and Rome. Tolentino’s distinct output of nationalist public statuary, which adhered to the orthodox traditions of the Roman academy, but were also part of an indigenization of the romantic aesthetic nationalism that arrived belatedly in the closing years of Spanish rule, were echoed by seniors from the old *gremios* like Vicente Francisco, Ramon Martinez, Ciriaco Arevalo, Jose Guzman, Manuel Flores, Crispulo Hocson, Felino Abdon, Marcelo Nepomuceno, Anselmo Espiritu, Vidal Tampingco, and Isabelo Tampingco. Tolentino in turn mentored Anastacio Caedo, Fidel Araneta, Anselmo Day-ag, and other Filipino sculptors of the mid-20th Century on the verities and spiritual certainties—if not stifling dogmas—of classicism. With the dominance of the Conservative movement throughout the first half of the 20th Century, Philippine Sculpture in the urban center would be assured its constant source of public and secular patronage through the developing republican requirements of statues in public plazas that celebrate national pride and militant—though bourgeois-oriented—defiance against imperial rule.

IV. MODERNITY, POSTMODERNITY, AND POSTCOLONIALITY

The advent of modern art in the Philippines in 1928 was primarily in painting, and sculpture would only follow a few years later. A consequence of the advocacy of Victorio Edades, and the increasing pace of American acceptance to modernist aesthetics in the Thirties, early Philippine Modern Sculpture before the Pacific War closely followed the Art Deco movement in its emphasis of a “total aesthetic environment” located in architectural planning and interior design. Characterized either by curving elegant lines, or stylized cubist planes, this form of “Sculptural Moderne” would be best seen in the work of Severino Fabie and the Italian expatriate Francesco Monti from the early 1930s to the early 1950s, when the more abstracted figurative sculptures of Napoleon Abueva would realign Philippine Sculpture towards a more internationalist perspective, one that also coincided with the development of Modernist Architecture as an aesthetic space with which to locate the more simplified forms.

The period between 1956 and 1986 would also form the crucial stage of the development of two chief schools within Modern Philippine Sculpture: the avant-garde that included Dadaist, Surrealist, Earth/Environmental Art, and Conceptual-Minimalist Art/Arte Povera; and the continuation of figurative sculpture in both semi-cubist and neo-academic forms. The former

would include the conceptual “machines” of David Cortez Medalla, the cubistic minimalism of Arturo Luz, and Allan Cosio; the exploration of metal relief and assemblage by Jeremias Elizalde Navarro, Lamberto Hechanova, and Raul Lebajo; the installations of Ray Albano, Johnny Manahan, and Roberto Chabet; and the environmental works of Junyee and Genara Banzon. The second movement would count among its various permutations the semi-abstracted figurative sculptures of Abdulmari Imao, Eduardo Castrillo, Virginia Ty-Navarro, Ramon Orlina, and Solomon Saprid; the neo-academic pieces of Jose Mendoza and Florante Caedo; and the expressionistic and surrealist pieces of Danilo Dalena, Duddley Diaz, and Julie Lluch. This thirty year period would also provide a proving ground for the next generation of sculptors who utilized the forms and markets opened by this first batch of modern Filipino sculptors, especially in the artificial conditions of elite and state patronage inaugurated during the Marcos presidency (1966-1986), as well as the expansion of the bourgeois market in the post-EDSA Revolution period from 1986 to the present. This second generation would include sculptors like Roberto Feleo, Agnes Arellano, Noell El Farrol, Rey Paz Contreras, Ben-Hur Villanueva, Dan Raralio, Jerusalino Araos, Imelda Pilapil, Claude Tayag, Gabriel Barredo, and Antonino Raymundo.

Through such art institutions inaugurated under the long cultural domination of First Lady Imelda Romualdez Marcos, such as the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP), and the Museum of Philippine Art (MOPA), Philippine Sculpture achieved a stable if somewhat elite-oriented audience that also tended to narrow the medium’s public to this particular segment. Attempts at producing “public sculpture” through state patronage have often met with indifference and apathy among the larger population due to the onerous political and economic conditions of Martial Law (1972-1986), as well as the unstable governance of Corazon Aquino (1986-1992). Despite the strengthening economy and emphasis on the centennial celebrations of the revolutionary declaration of Philippine independence in 1998 under Fidel Valdez Ramos (1992-1998), sculpture was relegated to an edificatory mode that further separated publics and art, which the brief and turbulent Estrada presidency (1998-2001) only managed to exacerbate. The period under Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo (2001-2010) has seen an ossification of the patterns of sculptural patronage and public indifference established since 1972. Only two segments of Philippine society thus have a stranglehold over patronage and the continuing validation of sculpture: the business executives, emerging entrepreneurs, and heads of large family-owned corporations like Ayala Corporation, Lopez Group of Companies, Benguet Corporation, or San Miguel Company; and the state either directly through the various executive departments, legislative offices, and local governments, or through the wealthier government-owned or operated corporations like the Government Service Insurance System, the Social Security System, and the Central Bank of the Philippines.

It is not surprising, thus, that in light of these conditions and material infirmities, the majority of public sculpture in the Philippines between 1972 to the present utilizes the technique of concrete reinforcement, brass-and-steel welding, or polymer resin-casting. These result in large-scale works that can be done economically and quickly, but often result in a peculiarly “distorted” aesthetic effect that reflects the sculptor’s inability to comprehend the effects of scaling up the design from *bozzetto* to full-scale. A testament to this inability resulting in considerable public opposition was the unveiling of Virginia Ty-Navarro’s *Our Lady of EDSA* (1989), which was considerably altered following her death in 1992 in response to public complaints of the icon’s “ugliness” and “disproportionality.”

On the other hand, the advent of corporate sponsorship in public art, pioneered by Ayala Corporation at the Makati Commercial Complex in the late 1960s, and dramatically expanded following the development of the Fort Bonifacio City and Filinvest Corporate City areas since 1995, resulted in a more harmonious placement of sculptures within a public (though capitalized) space, in which real estate values commensurate to the “first world” image of these sculpture was then highlighted, through the nearby construction of high-end corporate centers, shopping boutiques and entertainment centers, and condominium towers. Particularly, the Fort Bonifacio City development boasts well-produced and scaled works by artists such as Rey Paz Contreras, Sajid Imao, Lor Calma, Ferdinand Cacnio, Reginald Yuson, and Leo Gerardo Leonardo. The materials used have also changed from the still-prohibitive bronze cast (but also away from the “cheapness” associated with reinforced concrete and resin-casting) and into the more “modern” materials like stainless steel, copper, and glass.

The utilization of industrial materials as resource for contemporary Philippine Sculpture, especially since 1998, is not only the result of the infirmities of traditional sculptural infrastructure, however. It is also the result of Filipino artists' reevaluation and reflection of the increasing proliferation of industrial "dumpsites" and junkyards as inexpensive but qualitative spaces for reconfiguring and re-energizing sculpture away from the object-ness and dry heroic edification it has been associated in the 20th Century, and into a more socially-provocative and dialogic position to engage their audiences in the realization of sculpture either as part of their daily lives and concerns, or as a space of possibilities for dreaming and re-awakening. We need only two examples to illustrate this argument. The installations of Gabriel Barredo, which utilizes found objects recycled from antique junk heaps and metal shops, conjure a fantastic illusion of a dreamworld located within reality, a re-conceptualization of Latin American magic realism in three dimensions that calls to mind theatrical stage sets (which Barredo did in a four-year stint with the Atlanta City Ballet). On the other hand, the hand-wrought and humanly-scaled brass sculptures of Moralde Arrogante, sourced through specialty brass and copper junkshops, depict the everyday subject in an endearing and whimsical fashion through a crafts-like conception of sculpture. Using pliers and clamps, Arrogante respects the integrity of his material, but transforms them into what looks like post-apocalyptic statements of a civilization surviving and thriving in the aftermath of global Armageddon. Thus, in emphasizing the *strangeness* of the everyday dream as Freudian *unheimlich*, these two sculptors come closest to the conception of Philippine Sculpture as part of an increasing realization of the fragility—and certainly inconsequence—of modernity, and the path towards a more ecological negotiation with the political economy of sculptural production in the warming globe.

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